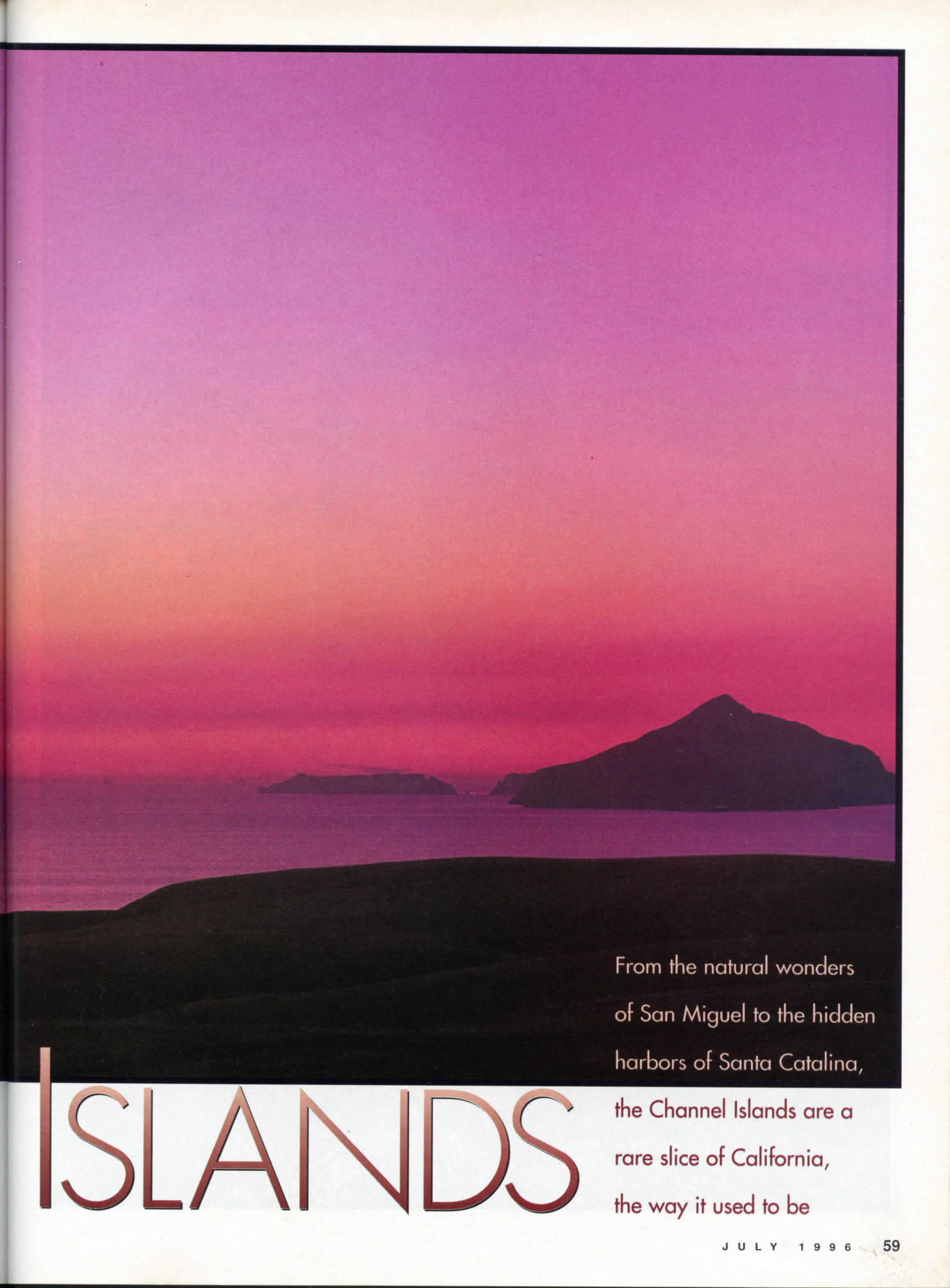


Dawn on Santa
Cruz Island: The
Channel Islands
may seem remote,
but Anacapa (right)
is just 11 miles from
the mainland (left).

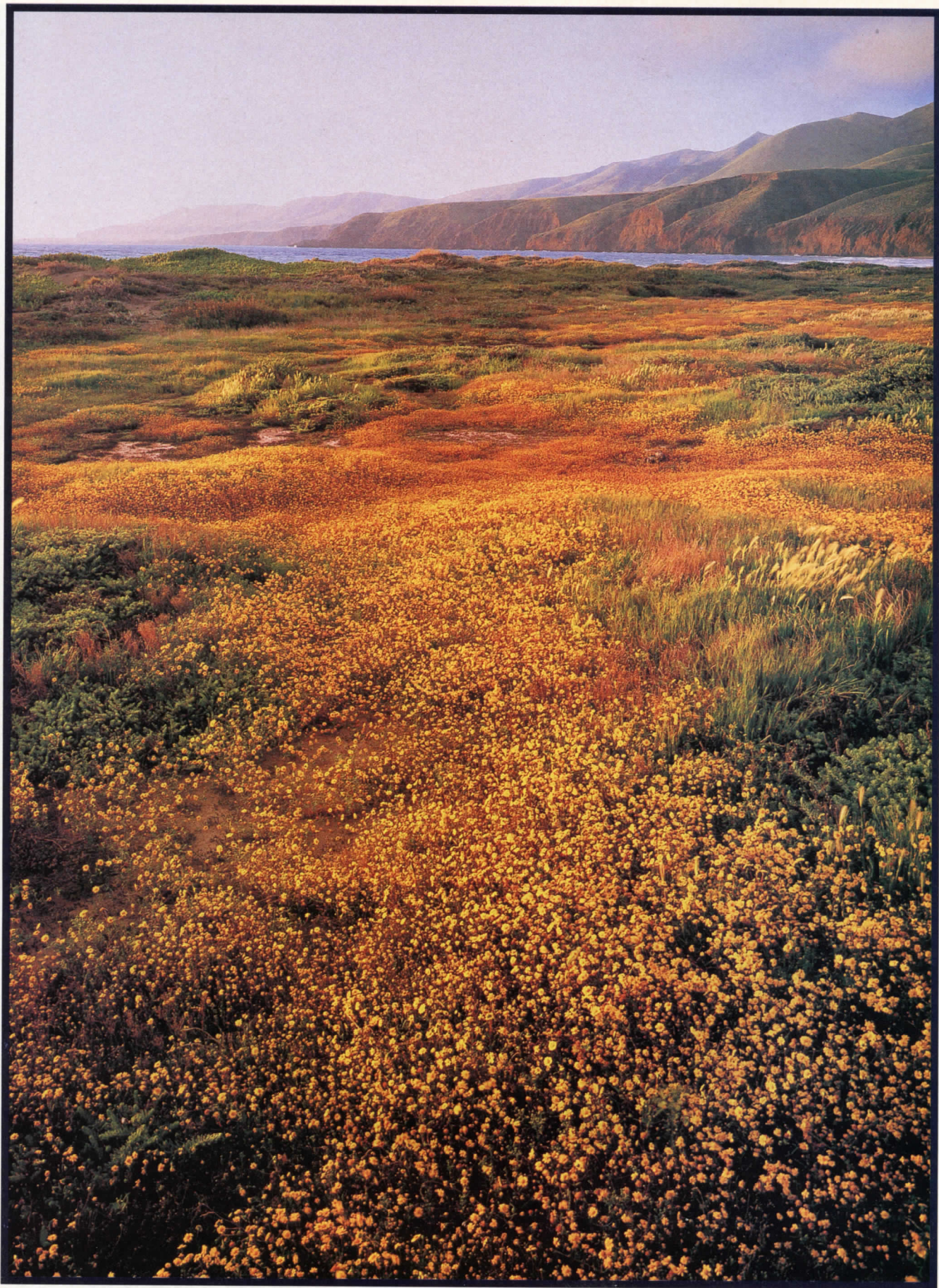
TON GAMACHE

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S FORGOTTEN



From the natural wonders
of San Miguel to the hidden
harbors of Santa Catalina,
the Channel Islands are a
rare slice of California,
the way it used to be

ISLANDS



LONG BEFORE THE BEACH COMES INTO VIEW, THE CLAMOR BEGINS TO BUILD—
AN UNTAMED NOISE IN AN UNTAMED PLACE. IT'S A 7-MILE WALK
ACROSS SAN MIGUEL ISLAND FROM MY CAMPGROUND TO
THE BEACH AT POINT BENNETT, THE ISLAND'S WESTERN TIP. HERE, SOUTHERN
CALIFORNIA ENDS IN A SERIES OF BOW-SPLINTERING REEFS. NORTHWEST, THERE'S

nothing, just the small outcrop of Richardson Rock, then more than 2,000 miles of open ocean before landfall on the Alaska Peninsula.

The trail cuts through grasslands that seem to bend and wave in San Miguel's undying northwest winds. Sand blows into dune fields, daring anything larger than a shrub to grow.

Indeed, though willows survive in sheltered ravines, San Miguel's only forest is a product of the wind and sand. It is made of a calcium deposit called caliche (ka-lee-chee) that encrusted plants as sand buried them thousands of years ago. What remains are sun-bleached casts of stems and stumps—a landscape of death masks.

Farther along, patches of waist-deep violet bush lupine soften the scene. As the trail climbs a final rise of windswept rock, ocean breezes deliver the scent of kelp mixed with the ripper smell of animals.

Then Point Bennett comes into view. Even if it were empty, its beauty would rival that of any stretch of coast on the mainland. Instead, it's alive with 15,000 marine mammals. In summer, the numbers reach 30,000.

Along the vast sweep, sea lions cluster near the water, elephant seals loll in looser groups farther in, and Northern fur seals range deep into the dunes. The fur seals' flippers, which they hold up to the breeze to keep cool and regulate their body temperature, wave in the air like palm fronds.

As the wind briefly ebbs, the noises become more distinct: barks and belches, groans and moans, great rushes of air from lungs that allow the largest of the animals, the elephant seals, to dive to depths of almost 5,000 feet for 45 minutes.

There's nothing pretty about the sounds, and yet they are beautiful to hear. Just 26 miles from the mainland is a wildlife display to rival any in Africa.

This is what the rest of Southern California must have once been like. That's the first impression of the Channel Islands. With more time, however, each of the eight islands becomes unique, a little piece of like-nowhere-else-in-the-world. As



On Santa Cruz Island, preservation efforts by The Nature Conservancy include protecting indigenous plants, such as coast goldfields (opposite), and a historic chapel (above) and other buildings in the island's Central Valley.

Marla Daily, president of the Santa Cruz Island Foundation, puts it, "Each island has its own heartbeat."

PARALLEL CALIFORNIAS

The helicopter swings around the eastern end of Santa Cruz Island, passes over a ridge, and takes me through the great gap of the island's Central Valley.

For almost a century, the valley was the heart of this island. Ahead is evidence: a grove of eucalyptus and a cluster of buildings—a slaughterhouse, a winery, and barns—some white-washed adobe, others made of island brick. Many date back more than 100 years, when Frenchman Justinian Caire began ranching on the island. The winery here was one of Southern California's largest until Prohibition, and the furrows of the vineyards are visible in the afternoon light.

On San Miguel, you always know you're on an island. Santa Cruz's scale, on the other hand, is continental: two major mountain ranges, 10 distinct plant communities with more than 650 species, and a complex geology. As for the Central Valley, it's an earthquake-fault rift zone.

The helicopter lands near the tiny Chapel of the Holy Cross built by the Caire family in 1891. A vintage Toyota Land Cruiser drives up to greet me, and out steps Rob Klinger and his dog, Astro. Klinger is the preserve ecologist for The Nature Conservancy, which has owned and managed 90 percent of Santa

Cruz Island since the death in 1987 of rancher Carey Stanton, who passionately loved the island. Astro is a Catahoula leopard, a Louisiana hunting dog. Together they make up the conservancy's biology team.

It's Klinger's job to try to reestablish the island's natural processes by monitoring plant and animal populations, eradicating aggressive non-native plants, and conducting experiments designed to test which technique—burning, spraying, or mowing—will best promote the return of native vegetation.

The question, though, is how do you know what to restore the island to?

The Channel Islands have the longest known human occupation of any site in California. And the arrival of deer mice on San Miguel may coincide with the arrival of humans close to 10,000 years ago. Scores of plant and animal species have been introduced during the last 150 years; in a natural system, maybe one new species would arrive per century.

"We don't know what was here. And it's probably a foolish endeavor to restore the island to some snapshot condition," says Klinger. "If natives go extinct naturally, that's the way it goes. We don't know enough to tinker with nature in depth."

Especially when nature itself is so capricious. Although the four northern Channel Islands—Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel—were linked during the last ice age, they have been separated long enough to allow certain plants and animals to evolve into species distinct even from cousins on neighboring islands.

With no land bridge to the coast, a biological crapshoot played out over thousands of years, as the whims of the wind and sea helped colonize the island with mainland species.

Woolly mammoths swam out, and a lack of predators, limited resources, and genetic isolation meant that later generations grew to only about half the size of their mainland ancestors. In a reverse of evolutionary fortunes, plants such as the giant coreopsis and *Ceanothus arboreis* grew large.

A look at food chains also illustrates the differences between the mainland and the isles. In historic times, the grizzly bear was the dominant land mammal carnivore in much of Southern California. Today on the Channel Islands, it's the island fox, an animal that would likely go down in a scrap with a house cat.

Nowhere has the human impact been stronger than on Catalina. Although Avalon is the island's most famous and popular attraction, 86 percent of the island is owned and managed by the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy, which oversees land where tens of thousands of cattle, goats, and sheep once grazed. With the gradual removal of these introduced animals, vegetation has increased during the last 40 years.

Still, feral goats endure on Catalina, and eradication efforts remain controversial. On Catalina, the ethical dilemma of whether to take life to save life is complicated by the fact that



one of the island's most famous symbols is its herd of American bison, descendants of 14 animals imported for a 1924 film shoot. Catch them lolling under the palm trees on the beach at Little Harbor and you've got an only-in-Catalina tableau.

"No, bison aren't native," says Misty Gay, a naturalist with the Catalina Conservancy. "Yes, they may be harmful, but they're also associated with the island's history, and they are much easier to maintain and control than sheep or goats."

Sometimes, removing introduced species isn't necessarily the best solution. On Santa Cruz, vast stands of fennel have sprung up where cattle once grazed. Though delicious in California cuisine, fennel is absolute hell on California landscapes. An aggressive plant that's well-adapted to Mediterranean climates, it secretes chemicals into the soil that native plants cannot withstand. Klinger says one 5,000-acre area is now 75 percent fennel.

THE RETURN OF ROCKCRESS, AND A COMET

The next morning, Klinger drives me from the island's Central Valley into the high country toward the island's west end. It's a happier story up here, although every muscle in Astro's body tightens as the Land Cruiser passes the occasional feral pig.

The road runs by a forest—the southernmost grove of Bishop pines in California—growing along a slope that often gets drizzled by thick fog. Walking to a point, Klinger looks for



small, asterisk-shaped plants known as rockcress. Back in 1990, only about a dozen of the rockcress remained. Now Klinger estimates the population at about 100 plants.

One rockcress grows at the base of a basalt outcropping dotted with orange and green lichens. The view looks east down the valley and west out to Santa Rosa and San Miguel. Giant coreopsis thrive on the slope, as do numerous other native plants. Biologically, it's one of the healthiest places on the island. Gorgeous, too, with a distinct but indescribable aura. Something here is right.

Half-apologizing, I try to explain my feeling to Klinger, acknowledging that it may sound ridiculous.

"No it doesn't," he replies. "It means you have a soul."

San Miguel has its souls, too. Native people lived here before it became separated from the other eastern Channel Islands. Later, in 1542, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo came here seeking a passage around the mythical island of California. He is said to be buried on San Miguel, but nobody knows where.

World War I veteran Herbert Lester is also buried here. He ran the island's ranch from 1930 to 1942, raised a family, and declared himself the king of San Miguel. Then, suffering from

San Miguel is the archipelago's wildest island. It's home to the eerie Caliche Forest (above) as well as to thousands of elephant seals who live, breed, and bark at the island's westernmost end, Point Bennett (right).

old war wounds and the prospect of being removed from his beloved island during World War II, Lester took a pistol, walked out to his favorite spot, and committed suicide.

In summer, Lester's meadow blooms red with native buckwheat. His gravestone stands where he died. Coreopsis has reclaimed the ranch and grows in a cluster that thickens as it drops into a ravine.

National park ranger Ian Williams makes his island home down here. His nearest neighbor, seal researcher Robert DeLong, works 7 miles away, at Point Bennett, and has for 27 years. San Miguel is a throwback to an older era of rangers—one characterized by solitude and independence, not to mention plenty of hauling of essentials to and from the airstrip.

The island will test those who venture here. But it rewards them, too, whether it's Williams on his 89th sojourn or me on my first. At 3 A.M. on my first full night, Williams awakens me and we head outside to check the skies. The 30-mph winds of the previous afternoon have slackened. There's no fog, and the moon has set. Starlight brightens the sky.



So does Comet Hyakutake. Little more than a smear when seen from the city, the comet, hanging above the V-shaped opening of the ravine, shines crisply and trails a tail across a huge stretch of sky. As we stand in silence for nearly an hour, half a dozen shooting stars streak through the night. A barn owl screeches and wings across the canyon.

The last time the comet came this close to Earth, no one lived here. Now, along with DeLong and a few seal researchers, Williams and I are the only people ever to have seen the comet from San Miguel. The heart I hear beating is my own.

ISLAND HOPPING

Our guide to remote Channel Islands National Park, and Santa Catalina, one of Southern California's most popular attractions

CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Five islands come under the park's jurisdiction. Begin at the mainland visitor center at 1901 Spinnaker Drive in Ventura; (805) 658-5730. Next door is Island Packers (for recorded information, call 642-7688; for reservations, 642-1393), which can get you out to the islands by boat (Island Packers also sails out of Oxnard). Prices run from \$21 for a 3½-hour round-trip excursion to Anacapa (with no landing) to \$65 for the 4½-hour round-trip chug out to San Miguel (a day trip from Santa Barbara Harbor). Camarillo-based Channel Islands Aviation (987-1301) has the park concession for air travel; round trips start at \$85.

Anacapa Island. Best bet for day trips, Anacapa is just 11 miles from Oxnard, a bit less than an hour by boat. East Anacapa Island has trails, the famous Arch Rock, and a historic lighthouse. West Anacapa Island is a pelican preserve and is closed to the public. Ask Island Packers about camping and sea-kayaking packages. In summer, Island Packers conducts trips to Frenchy's Cove for swimming and snorkeling.

Santa Cruz Island—East End. Part of the island's east end is privately owned. Merino sheep and feral pigs (hunted on certain summer weekends and in winter) still range through the hills. Though the east end is beautiful and has good hiking trails and numerous Chumash sites, the area is more like an old ranch than a nature preserve.

Horizons West (800/430-2544) operates one of only two noncamping lodgings in the park, at historic Smuggler's Ranch. Stay in the 1889 adobe ranch or in a beach cabin (no private baths). A three-day, two-night package includes airfare and meals for \$375 per person.

Even more rustic is nearby Scorpion Ranch. During "bring your own gear" weekends, bedrooms run \$45 to \$65 per person, and the boat ride costs \$55 round trip; you cook in the communal kitchen. During full-service weekends, the staff will take care of you (the food is delicious); the three-day, two-night minimum stay, with meals and boat transportation, costs \$325 per person.

Kayaking around the island's rugged coast and into its sea caves makes a great day. For information on kayak trips to the islands, call OAARS (805/646-6929), Paddle Sports (899-4925), or Aquasports (800/926-1140). Day trips run from \$50 to \$159 per person.

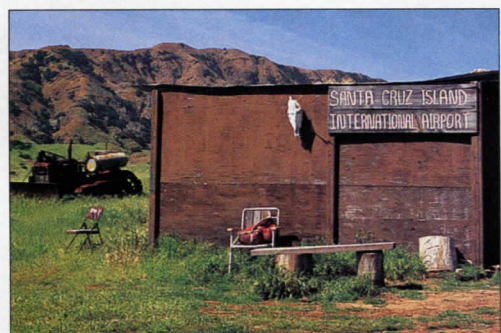
Santa Cruz Island—West End. The bulk of the island is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy as a preserve and is open on a limited basis (day trips only) in conjunction with Island Packers. One trip explores the island's north shore, where you hike about 2 miles from Prisoners' Harbor to Pelican Bay. The second goes into the Central Valley, a 3-mile hike from Prisoners' Harbor. Trips cost about \$49 per person.

Santa Rosa Island. Channel Islands Aviation makes frequent day trips from Camarillo (\$85 round trip) to Santa Rosa, where a ranger takes you by car and then foot to see one of only two natural stands of Torrey pines in the world, and to tide-pool and beach areas. You can bring camping gear and

make arrangements for a later pickup. Island Packers also sails to Santa Rosa.

San Miguel Island. This is the park's backcountry. The going is far from posh, and the sometimes rough boat crossing takes four to five hours.

Island Packers offers two-day excursions (\$235, including meals and sleeping berths) that leave in the middle of the night and



The "terminal" on Santa Cruz Island welcomes visitors to Smuggler's and Scorpion ranches.

stop at Santa Rosa on the return trip. On day trips, you can head for the Caliche Forest (5 miles round trip) or Cardwell Point (6 miles round trip).

Camping is available by reservation with the park service (no fees; \$90 for the round-trip boat ride). Be prepared for a nearly 1-mile uphill hike to the campsite from the beach. Two days on San Miguel gives you enough time to take the ranger-led 14-mile round-trip hike to Point Bennett.

Santa Barbara Island. This small island is a flat and open marine terrace. The main attractions here are isolation, good hiking trails, and pinniped populations. It's best appreciated after seeing one or two of the other islands. Island Packers conducts occasional day trips (\$49) and camping trips (\$75). The crossing takes about three hours.

SANTA CATALINA ISLAND

For information, call (310) 510-1520 and ask for a Visitor's Guide. Boats leave daily from San Pedro, Huntington Harbour, Long Beach, and Newport Beach; the fare is \$25 to \$46, round trip. (Tip: avoid Avalon on Tuesdays, since that's the day the cruise ships dock.)

Avalon. Even without getting far out of Avalon, you can experience the beauty of



The Two Harbors area of Santa Catalina is a favorite of campers, kayakers, and anyone looking to avoid the crowds of Avalon.



Catalina's natural side. You can snorkel and dive right next to the casino, and companies such as Descanso Beach Ocean Sports (310/510-1226) rent kayaks and offer guided trips to remote coves. A good hike right outside town starts at Hermit's Gulch campground, which is on the way up to the botanical gardens and Wrigley Memorial. The 4.5-mile loop climbs steeply but has great views. It is one of the guided hikes (\$12.50 and up) offered by Catalina Fitness Company (510-9255). You can also do the hike on your own with a permit.

Avalon is a treasure trove of Catalina tile. The art deco casino houses a fully restored movie theater and the Catalina Island Museum (510-2414; \$1.50). To learn more about Catalina's history, visit R. Franklin Pyke Bookseller (228 Metropole St.; 510-2588).

Two historic inns are the posh Inn on Mount Ada (510-2030; from \$340, including all meals) and the Zane Grey Pueblo Hotel (510-0966; from \$85).

The interior and Two Harbors. The Santa Catalina Island Conservancy (510-2595) conducts tours of the island's interior and of isolated coastal stretches; \$65 per person for two hours, with longer trips available. Narrated coach tours are available through Discovery Tours (\$29; 510-

OFFSHORE AND OFF-LIMITS

San Clemente and San Nicolas are the most distant Channel Islands, but it is their management by the Navy that has really kept them remote. Unless you were posted there, you've probably never visited San Clemente or San Nicolas—and you probably never will. Indeed, only 36 people have visited all eight Channel Islands.

Until recently, San Clemente was used by the Navy for target practice and bombing runs. San Nicolas's history is a bit more alluring. Ancient petroglyphs depict killer whales, dolphins, and sharks. The last Nicoleño, who left the island in 1853, inspired the book *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. And in the 1950s, the island was a top secret Cold War post for tracking Soviet submarines. Today, some of the same equipment is being used to track the movement of whales, bringing the island's human history full circle.

2500) and Catalina Adventure Tours (\$16.50; 510-2888).

Combine an interior visit with a stay in Two Harbors. During summer, you can take a 90-minute bus ride (\$14.50) or a 45-minute water shuttle (\$13) from Avalon to the town of Two Harbors. For lodging, try the historic 1910 Banning House Lodge. Many of the rooms have spectacular views (\$105 and up). Camping is also available on this part of the island, including in tepees at Two Harbors (from \$63 for six people). For Two Harbors information, call 510-2800. ■



Tile in Avalon was dug and fired right on Catalina.